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C O N F I D E N T I A L NAIROBI 004003

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/26/2025

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SUBJECT: SOMALILANDERS SEIZE JIHADISTS

Classified By: PolCouns Michael J. Fitzpatrick, Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D)

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1. (C) Media reports from BBC and Al Jazeera describe a September 22-23 shoot-out in Hargeisa, Somaliland. The shoot-out ended in seizure of four to eight individuals, some of whom the Somaliland government claims are "foreign Al Qaeda operatives." (NOTE: In the Somaliland context, "foreign" can mean from southern Somalia. END NOTE.) Somaliland officials have been quick to play up the importance of this seizure, claiming that one of the detainees is an internationally-known, Afghan-trained leader within Al Qaeda - but without naming him. Interior Minister Ishmael Aden suggested in public remarks that the detainees intended to disrupt the September 29 parliamentary elections. He also said the detainees were planning to mount a prison break in order to free 10 individuals with Jihadist connections currently on trial for the 2003/4 murders of Sister Annelina Tonnelli and two British aid workers.

2. (C) Post has been unable to make direct contact with Somaliland officials, but has been able to establish a common thread in e-mails from the War-torn Societies Project, the Danish embassy (through a Danish aid worker based in Somaliland), and press reports. Those arrested included a prominent local cleric, Sheikh Mohamed Mohamoud Nur. It appears the detainees were heavily armed and had enough explosives for a car or truck bomb, which seems connected to the prison-break portion of the Interior Minister's remarks. The timing of their planned attack may have been intended to occur at a high-profile moment for Somaliland, when its attempts to portray itself as a stable, democratic entity could be undermined by a successful attack on the security/justice systems. The detainees' likely connections to the suspects in the aid workers' murders would link them to Somalia's jihadists, but does not necessarily put them in the league of high-level Al Qaeda operatives. There is a sense among some international community contacts that the Somaliland government may be playing up the Al Qaeda connection for political gain, particularly while they have some international attention surrounding the upcoming elections. As the Danish Somalia watcher put it, "If these were really high-level Al Qaeda personalities, we would already know all their names."

3. (U) A Kenyan paper, The Sunday Standard, attributed the re-issuance of the Department's public announcement for East Africa on September 24 to concerns sparked by the shoot-out and arrests. On the other end of the spectrum, organizations and individuals planning to be in Somaliland during the parliamentary elections are proceeding as planned, some arguing that Hargeisa is safer now than it was a week ago.

4. (C) COMMENT: While the Somaliland authorities can claim a success in having thwarted a planned prison break/terror attack, they now need to put out more specifics as to who was detained and what was the plot. We will continue to seek out information on the individuals detained and clarification on their motivations. END COMMENT.

BELLAMY